

# What is depression and how can I get better? (Segment B)

## Table of Contents

Who can treat depression? .....	12
What if medications are recommended? .....	12
How do anti-depressant medications work? .....	13
What can be done about side effects? .....	15
What is cognitive-behavioral therapy? .....	16
What is group therapy?.....	16
What about other medical conditions? .....	17
Depression and alcohol .....	17
Improve your sleep.....	18
Exercise can help depression .....	19
Anxiety can complicate depression.....	20
Summary: what can be done about depression? .....	21

## Who can treat depression?

Many professionals treat people with depression. Some receive depression treatment from their doctor or other primary care provider (such as a nurse practitioner). Mental health providers, such as psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers, also treat depression. Psychiatrists are medical doctors who have the same medical training as your doctor, but specialize in mental health. Like your physician, psychiatrists can prescribe medications for depression. Psychologists are trained to use cognitive-behavioral therapies to help people with their depression symptoms. Social Workers are trained to help people coordinate their medical care and manage stressful situations, as well as to assist them with other challenges such as finances or housing. Clinical Social Workers have jobs similar to psychologists.

Some hospitals and clinics have teams that include primary care doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers. These teams work together to treat patients with depression. Regardless of the number of health professionals, THE PATIENT is the most important person on the treatment team. Cooperation, effort, and active participation are essential for a timely recovery!

## What if medications are recommended?

Anti-depressant medications may greatly improve recovery. Many new anti-depressant medications improve mood, energy level, sleep and anxiety problems and have few negative side effects. Anti-depressant medications are not addictive or habit-forming. A doctor will decide whether a patient should take an anti-depressant drug. The patient and doctor must work together to find the medication that works best for the patient. There are different types of medications for depression. If one type does not work, another might. It is very important for patients to monitor symptoms and call the primary care provider if there are questions or concerns. It is also important to not stop taking a medication without consulting with the medical provider.

## How do anti-depressant medications work?

Since depression is associated with chemical changes, anti-depressants work by re-balancing the chemicals and signals in the brain. Besides helping mood, they often help improve sleep, energy level, concentration, appetite, aches and pains. They do not take effect immediately; they often take 4-6 weeks to build up in the body before you feel better. Like any other medication, it should be taken as directed. Anti-depressants will not work properly if the directions are not followed. Even when the patient's mood begins to improve s/he will need to continue the medication. All patients should consult with their providers about how long to continue taking anti-depressants.



There are several common types of anti-depressant medication.

Tricyclics/heterocyclics like Amitriptyline, Nortriptyline or Trazodone have been used for the last few decades. The newer anti-depressants include the Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (or SSRIs), such as Sertraline ("Zoloft"), Paroxetine ("Paxil"), Fluoxetine ("Prozac"), and Citalopram ("Celexia"), as well as other medications such as Bupropion ("Wellbutrin") and Venlafaxine ("Effexor") that do not fit into the SSRI category, and other new medications that continue to be developed. These newer medications often have fewer and more tolerable side effects than the older anti-depressants. All anti-depressants work by activating natural chemicals that aid in communication between nerve cells in the brain.

### Anti-depressant Medication Information and Tips

- ◆ Anti-depressants help balance chemicals in the brain.
- ◆ Anti-depressants are not addictive or habit forming.
- ◆ Many people find their sleep and appetite improve first, while their mood, energy and negative thinking take a few more weeks to get better.
- ◆ Anti-depressants need to be taken daily.
- ◆ If you think you are experiencing side effects write down what they are and how often they occur. Talk about them with your provider.
- ◆ Call your provider if you are concerned about an unpleasant sensation you think is related to your medication.
- ◆ Do not stop taking the medication before you discuss it with your provider.
- ◆ Keep all medications away from children.
- ◆ Call your provider if you have any questions about your anti-depressant medication.

## What can be done about side effects?

All medicines have some side effects. However, not all people experience them. Side effects often mean that the medication is working. Many people who take anti-depressants feel side effects before their mood improves. This can be discouraging, but try to wait it out because your symptoms will improve. Side effects often go away within a few weeks and can be managed in the meantime with some simple remedies (see chart below). If you experience side effects, continue to take your medications as directed, but consult your doctor right away. If the side effects are too negative, your provider will be able to adjust the dosage or switch you to a different anti-depressant.

Some Common Side Effects: What To Do Until They Disappear <sup>*</sup>	
Side Effect	Solution
Dry mouth	Drink plenty of water. Chew sugarless gum or use sugarless gumdrops to increase moisture in your mouth.
Constipation	Eat more fiber-rich foods such as prunes, fresh fruits, bran cereals, or whole wheat breads. Take a stool softener. Increase fluid intake.
Drowsiness	Get fresh air and take frequent walks. Try taking your medicine earlier in the evening. If you are taking your medication in the day, ask your medical provider if you can take it at night.
Wakefulness	Take medications early in the day. Learn more about insomnia (see page 18). Take a hot bath and have a light snack before bed.
Dizziness	Get up slower. Drink plenty of fluids. If worried, see your medical provider.
Sexual Dysfunction	Ask your doctor about medications that minimize this side effect, such as Bupropion (“Wellbutrin”) or Nefazodone (“Serzone”).

<sup>\*</sup>From the Integrated Program Intervention Manual, Group Health Cooperative

## What is cognitive-behavioral therapy?

Medication is not the only treatment choice for improving depression. Many patients also benefit from cognitive-behavioral therapy. Cognitive-behavioral treatment helps patients become more aware of their feelings, thoughts, and actions. Patients often work with a psychiatrist, psychologist or social worker to develop strategies for changing how they think and act. For example, some people with depression often see the world in a negative light, while others do not participate in activities that are rewarding, enjoyable, or give them a sense of accomplishment. Often cognitive-behavioral therapy helps patients increase positive thoughts and pleasurable activities. Another example: a person with depression who has a specific problem with a loved one can work with a therapist to identify and test new ways of dealing with the problem. Cognitive-behavioral therapy also works on resolving the hopelessness and helplessness common among depressed people. The therapist may also encourage techniques such as relaxation so that a patient is better able to approach a stressful family situation or other problem.

## What is group therapy?

People with depression often benefit by attending group therapy. A group usually has between 5 and 12 patients and is led by a psychiatrist, psychologist, or social worker. Most groups take place at a hospital or clinic, but some are run at community centers. Sessions last between 45 and 90 minutes. Each person in the group has a chance to talk about her/his situation and provide support and advice to others in the group. The group leader may select certain topics or themes for the session such as improving communication or practicing relaxation. Group therapists often teach participants about cognitive-behavioral therapies. Patients who go to group therapy can expect:

- ◆ to learn from others and their experiences,
- ◆ to gain strength and hope by knowing that they are not alone, and
- ◆ to have the opportunity to help others by sharing experiences.

## What about other medical conditions?

People who suffer from depression may have other medical illnesses that are a source of stress. It is not unusual for people with chronic medical illnesses to become depressed. Health problems or medical conditions may keep a person from doing activities previously enjoyed. Adjusting to a new lifestyle and losing the ability to do favorite pastimes may negatively affect mood. In this situation it is important to focus on what CAN be done, rather than what cannot.

People who are depressed and also have other medical illnesses often juggle different pills and medication schedules. Patients should talk with their doctor, nurse, or social worker about how best to manage multiple medications.

## Depression and alcohol

Many people feel that having a drink helps them feel better or relax. Drinking often seems to improve mood. But studies show that after the immediate effects of alcohol wear off, moods become even lower than before drinking. In fact, alcohol acts as a nervous system depressant; it makes patients feel worse in the long run. A person with depression should monitor alcohol intake because it acts as a depressant. If the depressed person has a problem with alcohol, help and treatment are available. It is important to consider any use of alcohol, because it actually may worsen symptoms of depression. Alcohol can also interfere with the effects of anti-depressant and other medications. Anyone taking anti-depressant medications should discuss with their medical provider the safety of alcohol use while taking the medication. Likewise, you



should discuss with your provider any other medications you are taking, including both prescribed and over-the-counter medications as well as herbal remedies, in order to avoid undesirable drug-drug interactions. Finally, it is best to avoid recreational drugs for similar reasons that we recommend avoiding alcohol.

## Improve your sleep

Many depressed people experience sleeping problems. Some common complaints include:

- ◆ Having trouble falling asleep.
- ◆ Sleeping restlessly, waking often.
- ◆ Waking early in the a.m.
- ◆ Sleeping too much, at night and/or during the day.

Depression can disturb the body's "clock" and sleeping schedule. When the clock is disrupted, the body cannot tell when it is time for sleep. Problems with sleep can increase the depression symptoms of sluggishness and low energy. A regular sleep schedule is an important way to resolve abnormal sleep patterns. One can gain more control over sleep by using the following tips.

### Sleep Tips

- ◆ Sleep between 6 and 8 hours each night. As people age they actually need less sleep. Adults usually need 6-7 hours nightly.
- ◆ Establish a routine: go to bed about the same time each night and get up about the same time each morning. Using this routine will tell the body "time for sleep" and "time to get up" and help it get back to a natural rhythm.
- ◆ Avoid napping during the day. Napping confuses the internal clock.
- ◆ Avoid reading, watching TV and activities other than sleeping in bed. This may seem difficult, but getting in bed should signal the body that it is "time for sleep".
- ◆ Try to limit caffeine use (coffee or colas).
- ◆ Try to limit your use of alcohol. You may fall asleep more quickly after drinking alcohol, but it often causes restless sleep.
- ◆ Get some exercise during the day. Exercise helps to improve sleep and sleep patterns.
- ◆ Relax before bedtime. Keep activities quiet and relaxing an hour or more before bedtime.
- ◆ Create a good environment for sleep. Make changes to reduce disruptions such as noise, lights, an uncomfortable bed, or a stuffy room.



## Exercise can help depression

Exercise can be beneficial to everyone, regardless of physical condition. Exercise, even if it is as simple as taking a short walk or doing a few stretches, improves mood. Exercise increases blood levels of the body's natural painkillers called endorphins. It actually affects the same chemicals in the brain as anti-depressant medications. Before exercising, check with your doctor about what kinds of exercise are appropriate and safe for you.

- ◆ Exercise may seem difficult at first, so be sure to start slow and allow a couple of weeks to adjust.
- ◆ Pick activities that are enjoyable and that are appropriate for your physical condition. Even walking 10 minutes a day can make a difference.
- ◆ Monitor progress in a small notebook or on a calendar.
- ◆ Be sure to give yourself credit even for small successes; walking to the corner and back is much better than not doing it.

Even if you are physically limited, you will benefit from keeping yourself going. In addition to being a natural anti-depressant, physical activity can be helpful for everyone.



Exercise improves mood.

## Anxiety can complicate depression

Many people with depression also experience problems with anxiety. It appears that anxiety and depression are both associated with the depletion of the same chemicals in the brain. Fortunately, many of the same treatments that work for depression also help control anxiety. Generalized anxiety disorder is much more than the normal anxiety people experience day to day. It's chronic and exaggerated worry and tension, even though nothing seems to provoke it. Having this disorder means always anticipating disaster and often worrying excessively. Sometimes the source of worry is hard to pinpoint. Simply the thought of getting through the day can provoke anxiety.

### Common Symptoms of Generalized Anxiety and Anxiety "Attacks"

Feeling keyed up and nervous	Sweating
Excessive worry	Shaking
Muscle tension	Feeling light-headed
Pounding heart	Sensations of heat or cold
Tight and painful chest	A looming feeling of disaster
Shortness of breath	Trouble sleeping

Anxiety attacks may make people fear places where there are crowds or where leaving will be difficult or embarrassing. Because of severe symptoms that accompany anxiety attacks, it is natural to think that something is physically wrong. Chest pain or shortness of breath are frightening and can make people think they are having a heart attack or a stroke. If you find yourself avoiding situations because they make you afraid or anxious, it is even more important to stay active and involved. Confronting your fears will give you some power back and will help you feel more in control. If you suffer from symptoms of anxiety, discuss them with your medical provider.

## Summary

- ◆ Depression is treatable. The two most common treatments for depression are anti-depressant medications and cognitive-behavioral therapy (either group or individual).
- ◆ Recovery from depression takes time, anywhere from a few weeks to a few months.
- ◆ Patients can make important contributions to their recovery by following their medical provider's instructions and improving sleep and exercise habits.
- ◆ Depression and anxiety are related and can often be treated at the same time or with the same medications.